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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIJING 024242

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [CH](#)  
SUBJECT: CHINESE MEDIA TREADS CAREFULLY IN COVERING RECENT  
UNREST

REF: A. BEIJING 22812  
[1](#)B. CHENGDU 1228  
[1](#)C. GUANGZHOU 32264  
[1](#)D. BEIJING 13858

Classified By: Classified by Political Internal Unit Chief Susan A.  
Thornton. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) Recent flashes of violent unrest have gotten uneven coverage in the Chinese media. Although news of a toddler's death that touched off a hospital rampage in Sichuan appeared in local newspapers and reports of student riots in Jiangxi aired on provincial television, local press has remained mum on other violent incidents. Journalists told us that no new media guidance on reporting unrest has been issued and, when it comes to coverage of local clashes, provincial Propaganda authorities decide on their own what to ban. While they made clear that reporting on incidents touching on stability is risky for editors and journalists, they argued that the spread of news through informal channels is forcing some media outlets to step up sensitive reporting. Regarding the trend in unrest incidents, contacts we spoke with dismissed recently released Ministry of Public Security statistics indicating that the number of protests has fallen this year, noting that the numbers are structurally inaccurate and that instability will not abate. End Summary.

Land Seizures, Health Care Trigger Protests  
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[1](#)2. (C) Several violent protests have grabbed the attention of Chinese and western journalists in recent weeks:

-- College students in Nanchang, Jiangxi rioted October 23-24 after they were told the government would not recognize their diplomas (Ref A).

-- In Shandong province on November 5, thousands of villagers and police clashed over the alleged corrupt handling of a land compensation deal.

-- After a three-year-old boy died from pesticide poisoning in Sichuan province November 7, thousands ransacked a local hospital after learning that medical staff allegedly refused to treat the boy without advance payment (Ref B).

-- Villagers in Sanzhou, Guangdong province took some 300 officials and dignitaries hostage November 8, also

to protest land confiscation (Ref C).

¶3. (C) Only the Jiangxi and Sichuan incidents received play in Mainland media, in both instances mostly at the local level. News that Jiangxi students trashed their vocational school's campus appeared on provincial television, but the slant of the reporting was to caution against further demonstrations and to highlight the responsiveness of the local government, contacts said. (Note: Dramatic photos of the riot appeared on overseas Chinese websites. End Note.) Similarly, the Guang'an Daily in Sichuan ran an article about the boy's death and subsequent protest that laid the blame for the events on the family and on a "speculator" who urged them to demand compensation. After several foreign news outlets reported that medical staff refused to treat the three-year-old without advance payment, the English-language China Daily published a piece stressing that the hospital provided adequate care and that blame for the boy's death rests with the family.

#### No Propaganda Guidelines

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¶4. (C) The Propaganda Department has issued no blanket guidelines on how to handle unrest, said Zhou Qing'an (protect), a regular contributor to The Beijing News. When a flare-up receives intense international attention, censors are likely to hand down coverage rules, often with only the official Xinhua News Service permitted to report developments. Such was the case when a video emerged showing thugs using lethal force to evict Hebei province villagers

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from wheat fields in June 2005. After the footage appeared on the BBC and articles ran in Mainland dailies such as The Beijing News, Propaganda officials made Xinhua the sole conduit for news on the issue. But for the most part, provincial Propaganda Departments are supposed to take the lead in issuing rules on a case by case basis, Zhou said. Despite extensive foreign media coverage of the Sichuan confrontation, Zhou said he is unaware of specific rules from the central Propaganda Department relating to the incident.

¶5. (C) Cai Wei (protect), who writes for the popular magazine Sanlian Life Weekly, observed that local officials will sometimes use the media to promulgate their side of a given story or to expose misconduct of rivals and score political points. Cai surmised that in the Sichuan hospital episode, the reporting that appeared was meant to tamp down rumors. Propaganda authorities may have even written the copy of the articles themselves, Cai said. As for the China Daily piece, the newspaper's role is to present the position of the Chinese government to the outside world, not to engage in aggressive journalism, remarked Wang Feng (protect), a journalist at the influential bi-weekly Caijing Magazine. Wang said the China Daily article was meant as a rebuttal to the foreign coverage, which focused on problems in China's medical system. The China Daily piece, by contrast, "blames the poor family" for the poisoning, Wang remarked.

#### Sudden Incidents Law Still In Draft

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¶6. (C) A draft law that would strictly limit reporting on protest incidents is controversial and faces numerous hurdles before being approved by China's legislature, the National People's Congress, our contacts said. Under the proposed legislation, news outlets would be required to obtain local

government approval prior to running related stories or risk fines of up to RMB 100,000 (USD 12,500). Reporting "false" news could incur similar penalties. Wang of Caijing said deliberations on the law are progressing slowly, adding that contacts have told him NPC members are divided over how to proceed. (Note: Media outlets greeted the announcement of the draft law with vocal opposition, including in print. See Ref D. End note.) In the meantime, reporting on some stories that would squarely fall under the "sudden incident" category, such as mine accidents, continues. Our contacts have broadly defined "sudden incidents" as disasters, health crises or social unrest.

17. (C) When a protest or accident occurs, word gets out in the local population via phone and text message, said He Jiangtao, an editor at Citizen Magazine. The local press is then compelled to publish a report, even a partial one, to retain a degree of credibility among readers. In He's view, people are sophisticated enough to know that what appears in print is often only the official side of the story. This fuels more rumors about what is really happening, he said. Meanwhile, student demonstrations are a growing worry for the censors, claimed Zhou Qing'an. Students are so tech savvy these days that they post descriptions and digital photos of protests on blogs and overseas Chinese websites, using proxy servers to navigate around firewalls, almost instantly -- and well before authorities can impose restrictions.

#### Social Frictions Not Waning

18. (C) Government claims that social unrest in China is waning were dismissed by scholars and journalists we spoke to as unlikely. At a November 7 press conference, the Public Security Bureau announced that the number of so-called "disturbances of public order" in China has declined in 2006 by 22.1 percent, but contacts criticized the figures as structurally inaccurate. They ascribed the upbeat statistics to underreporting on the part of local officials who are under pressure from central authorities to prevent conflicts in the face of increased protests. Contacts we spoke to, on the contrary, posited that social unrest is not waning, but increasing. The issues that generate protest activity -- corruption and abuse of power, land seizures, environmental degradation and

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failings in the health and education systems -- are not being effectively addressed.

19. (C) In this vein, the Sichuan hospital incident did not come as a surprise to Ma Rong, director of the Sociology Department at Beijing University. "Everyone hates doctors these days," he said, commenting that medical fees are exorbitant no matter what a patient's income is. He added that while elimination of agricultural taxes and school fees has boosted incomes in the countryside, access to reliable health care outside urban areas remains spotty. Li Dun, a professor at Tsinghua University's Center for the Study of Contemporary China, separately made a similar point, emphasizing that close to 90 percent of China's rural residents are uninsured. What would happen if an epidemic broke out, Li wondered, suggesting that the strains on the health system could give rise to major social frictions.

#### Comment

10. (C) The Chinese leadership clearly continues to

view press reporting on controversial issues as a threat to social stability. As such, even if the draft law limiting media treatment of "sudden incidents" does not move forward, propaganda authorities will strive to keep a lid on reports about social unrest or to spin stories so as to bolster public confidence in the authorities and tamp down resentment. The ability to manage this, however, is already spotty and, several contacts predicted, will get more difficult over time.

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